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Adult education hard-hit by changes in school spending rules, study finds

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Adult education programs were hard-hit by changes in spending rules for school districts struggling to keep basic operations going during California's budget crisis, according to a [new study](#) released Thursday.

The spending mandates for formerly required programs, such as adult education, ended when the

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state slashed targeted funding for them by 20% in 2009, while also approving steep cuts to basic education dollars.

Local school officials took advantage of new-found flexibility by reducing spending on suddenly optional offerings by well more than 20%.

Eight of the 10 school districts in the study "reduced adult education programs, often sharply," wrote the researchers.

"Spending on core instructional materials, including textbooks, was also reduced in the majority of districts," the report stated. "Special instructional activities for gifted and talented students were pared-back or eliminated in six of 10" school systems.

"Deregulation led to cuts beyond the 20% made by Sacramento," said UC Berkeley professor Bruce Fuller, a primary author with Brian Stecher of the Santa Monica-based Rand Corp. "Various student/family groups -- rich and poor -- are getting hit. Deregulation isn't the culprit necessarily. It's just that it allows for the erosion of state priorities."

There was no uniform response to the financial crisis nor a common understanding of how the flexibility was supposed to work, the study found. There has been no recovery to date, although a slightly brightening state budget outlook has reduced additional cutbacks expected for next fall.

The new budgeting rules also had positive effects, said Long Beach Unified Supt. Christopher J. Steinhauser, whose district participated in the study.

"We love the flexibility," Steinhauser said. "We truly believe it doesn't go far enough. But it shouldn't be a trade-off for less money."

In Long Beach, the money transfers allowed the district to make fewer cutbacks to elementary school music training, libraries, counseling services and nurses.

The school system, one of the state's largest, also spent transferable money on new efforts to increase student success in algebra and improve enrollment in Advanced Placement courses.

And student performance is improving in both areas, Steinhauser said. But the adult school took a major hit. A popular cosmetology program was axed as well as other enrichment or career-oriented classes.

Instead, the district tried to retain adult classes that helped students complete diplomas. Overall, adult school enrollment dropped from more than 14,000 to about 5,000 students.

Other districts that have slashed adult school include Beverly Hills Unified and Los Angeles Unified. The L.A. Unified cutbacks included popular classes for seniors.

This month, students and teachers staged a protest over the looming elimination of a popular nursing-training program.

"There are over 400 people on the waiting list and there is 100% job placement," said adult education teacher Matthew Kogan. "This is a great career path and exactly the kind of thing we should be doing in L.A. Unified."

The L.A. Unified protesters accused the school system of cutting more than necessary and in the wrong places.

They said a reduced adult education program had too far many administrators, for example. But district officials have insisted the real culprit is the declining state budget.

-- Howard Blume

Photo: Students in a class last year at John H. Francis Polytechnic High School in Arleta. Credit: Lawrence K. Ho / Los Angeles Times.

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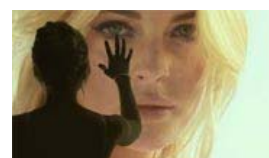
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